

**drinking
gasoline
in hell**



by bill shields



My thanks to John Eberly, who got
the vision...again, for Kathleen-
who has had a few sips also.

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Other books by Bill Shields:

Sparks of Hell

Post Vietnam Stress Syndrome

Post Vietnam Stress Syndrome II

Anatomy Of A Male Slut

Nam

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phoenix

I'm tired of writing these goddamn poems
that so few dogs of my own age will ever read
Vietnam is as dead in their eyes
as a homeless vet asleep on the streets
of hell
I'd rather leave the door open
here at 512 South Fifth Street tonight
& give 'em a seat in the bunker
of my nightmares
where Charlie
can slit a throat slick above
a power tie

plain grey town

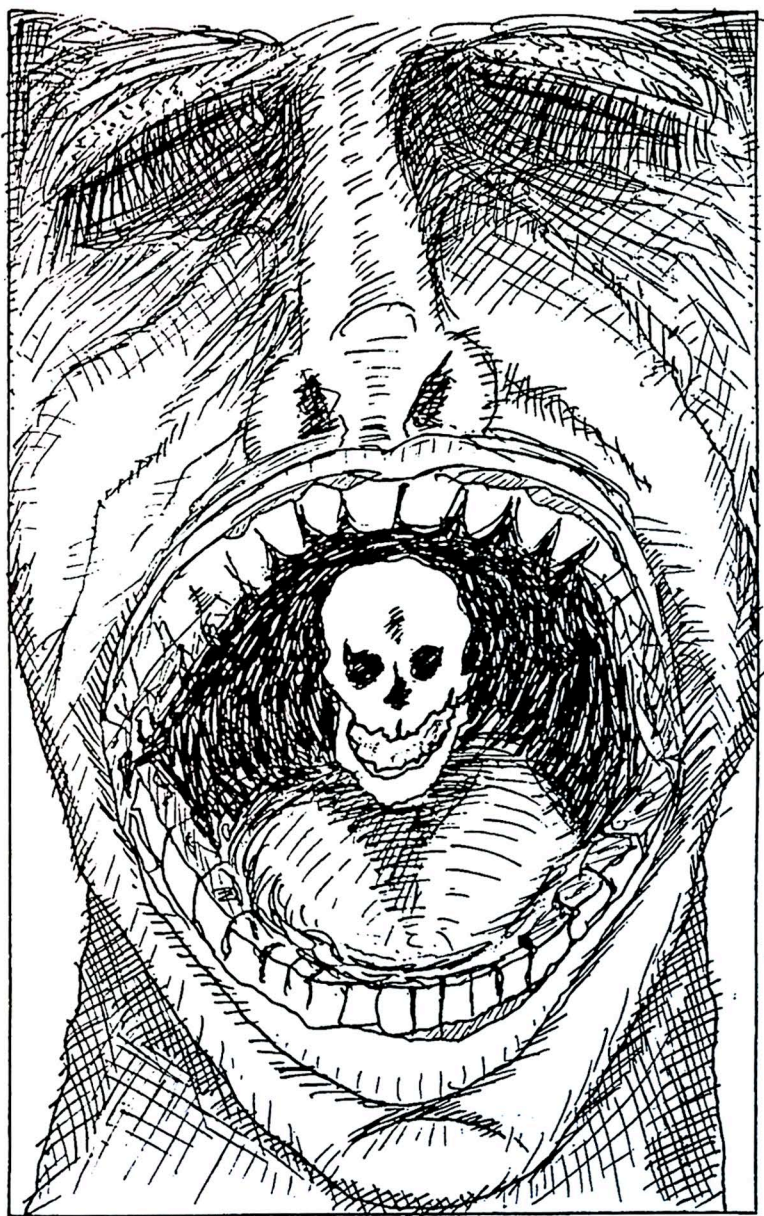
the rain splashing mud against the house
I watch from a straightback chair in the kitchen
the fog knee-high at dawn
as I sip my coffee & stare out the window
into the white noise of another day
on the Cambodian border

drinking gasoline in hell

there were the years of hate
your spit soaked into my uniform back in 1970
& your apathy has stained my Purple Hearts
for forever
my dead are not your dead
you walked out on our funeral years ago
& now, in fashion, you've lined up
to be pall bearers at the local heroes hill
but now nobody's playing
corpse

years

there were the years of silence & self-annihilation
the Vietnamese strolling behind my eyes
their voices waking me in the night
& scaring me through the days
I fell face-down on the bathroom floor
at the local mall trembling from an incoming round
of a slammed door
my anger vacated all the rooms
of my family's home & destroyed a wife
as my high school friends went on with their lives
in a small town smirking behind state college degrees
a revolution hiding behind their womens' asses
& now they drag their adolescent children to the movies
to see how the Vietnam war really was in 1989
& I'm still not talking



this one is for the Viet Cong

I've waited on you for years asleep
& awake turning around unexpectedly
expecting your shadow & your knife
& there was nothing

I killed you years ago
& you've slit my throat everyday
since December 10th 1969
on the flight home
back to the Mekong
Delta

I didn't kill 'em

nothing but a human handful left from the ravages
of a peace throughout a rising Dow Jones Average
these friends of mine have died
not just from the dioxin & its poisoning
but the years of silence & failed lives
a shame that walks quicker
than any shadow of hell
I've sat back-to-back with them
whispering in the jungle
thru years of nights listening
for the sounds of movement & death
& I never had to wait
too long

I've always wanted to write this poem

I miss the pump of a firefight so unexpected
the death & surprising life
they lasted no longer than five minutes
the shots & mortars
but the adrenalin swam for hours
exhilarating
wanting to kill everything
over & over
for all my dead friends
so dead

autobiography

the nights when the blade digs deep in my throat
I slide down the Delta's muddy banks & onto
these clean white sheets
I spent eleven months & ten days in a war
& the last twenty years pinning myself against a wall
waiting on the door to close & the voices to fade
with enough air for three minutes
of peace

there is no metaphor for the pain

thousands of us live with disemboweled children
clung to our memories freshly-lit

the napalm burns in our dreams as killing
the little people out there, In the treeline

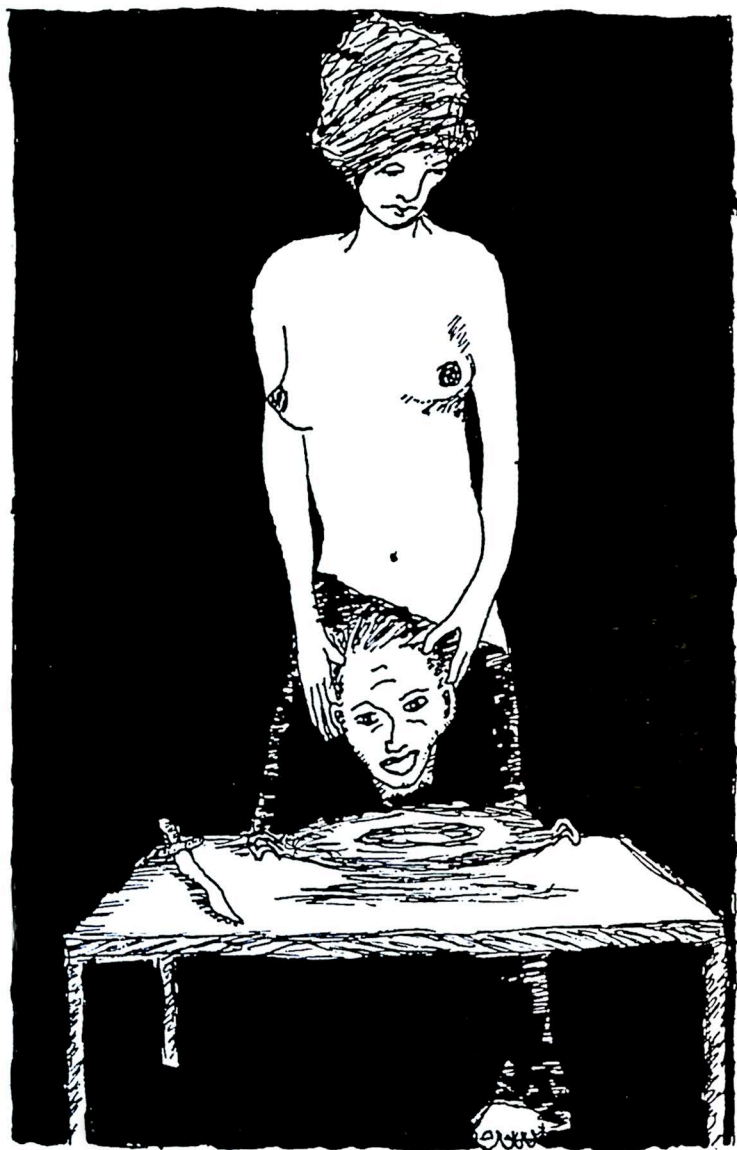
where the blackened bodies lay contorted
counted & forgotten

& after all these years, I don't care
if you can forgive me because

I'll never forgive myself

walls of fire

I live the memories alone
the firefights curl up under the blankets
intimately contorting my body face-down
& shaking with fear
the dead walk slightly above
the jungle floor
their blood steaming behind them
as the new guy on point handsignals
all clear, bill shields
all clear



wife

I see you in the mornings your hands shaking coffee
a mild cigarette hanging limp forgotten & lit
your eyes wired into the high-voltage of last night's dreams
bulging from the horror of my war
There is nothing I can do
my wounded have filled the beds of a hundred apartments
their blood trails have followed me from California
to Pennsylvania
& just this morning I found two more marines in our back
bedroom hanging in the concertina
& I pulled the covers over their eyes

Nam nightmares

I lay here in my bed one more night
wanting a woman to hold
or a knife
& wonder
if
a man in Ho Chi Minh City
is also sweating thru the sheets

the 1st time

my feet were scrambling through the Delta
those first years of a marriage
we were evicted from 10 fingers of apartments
as my war scarred the landlord's walls
& the nighttime screams broke lease
after lease
I would wake up in the night feeling your body
next to me in the bunker & wonder
who-the-hell
you were

relations

I've brought my own swarm of mosquitoes nipping the blood
of memories no marriage can swat away
my kids look at Vietnam not as a country
but a long-absent father talking weekly
on the phone

 their mother washed the Mekong Delta
out of her sheets then burned them in court
& I'm still pulling leeches off my arms & legs
the memories swatting away the blood

Victims

what the hell can I say
when my ten year old daughter
wakes up screaming at 4 am
from a nightmare about Vietnam

too young to forget

those nights I held you on the couch
in the pure darkness of the city
I whispered to you
my daughter, in diapers
to hand me my knife behind the cushions
& you did, unquestioning, out in the tiger grass
on another mission through Parrot's Beak
Cambodia

going away

she looks up at me through high heels & braces
too self-conscious to smile her dimples
long ago hidden in the closet
with her Vietnam veteran
Dad

my daughter

I lie awake nights thinking of you dying
that small blond head dwarfed by adult pillows
your screams of pain have found me here
in Pennsylvania these years later
crying beside a new wife

& waiting

for the Agent Orange
to finish the job

like a tattoo entitled "Mother"

I helped lower her into the ground
this stranger she once loved & visited
weekly at the V. A. hospital

tears fell
like rain on the family's mascaraed face
as I watched the old lady walk that
wooden hallway one more time & hold
her son's hand as he screamed
the Vietnam war through
another night



We like to play war.





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